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AUTHOR Feshbach, Norma D.; Kuchenbecker, Shari Y.  
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## ABSTRACT

The authors' investigations of the antecedents and consequences of the empathy response have been guided by a three-component model of empathy. Two of these components are cognitive: the ability to discriminate and label affective states in others, and the ability to assume the perspective and role of another person. Emotional capacity and responsiveness constitute the third component. One implication of this model is that social understanding is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the occurrence of the empathy response. While the authors review several studies on empathy they stress results accruing from the investigation of the relationship between social comprehension and empathy (Kuchenbecker, Feshbach, and Pletcher, 1974). As the child grows older, the ability to comprehend social situations increases, as does the tendency to share the affective state of individuals in these social situations. The social comprehension factor becomes associated with the remedial progress in achievement of the child, while empathy becomes more strongly associated with social behavior. The authors predict that those programs which attend to the affective as well as the cognitive aspects of social interaction will prove to be the most successful in enhancing pro-social behaviors. (Author/PC)

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## A THREE COMPONENT MODEL OF EMPATHY\*

Norma D. Feshbach

Shari Y. Kuchenbecker

University of California, Los Angeles

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## A THREE COMPONENT MODEL OF EMPATHY

Norma D. Feshbach

Shari Y. Kuchenbecker

University of California, Los Angeles

The study of empathic behavior in children has recently become a focal point of interest for a number of investigators. The research has been concerned with empathy as a phenomena, with its assessment, development and functions (Aronfreed, 1968; Borke, 1971; Chandler, 1973; Feshbach, 1973a; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969; Feshbach and Roe, 1968) and with its possible role as an important mediator of positive social behaviors such as helping, altruism and moral conduct (Hoffman, 1970; Staub, 1971; 1972). The general agreement as to the significance of empathy as a process or as a behavior, is in sharp contrast to the very different meanings afforded the construct. The widely varying approaches to the study of empathy in children, mirror the problems that have confused the study of empathy in adults (Stotland, 1969).

One major source of ambiguity is the degree to which cognitive versus emotional criteria are used as defining properties of empathy. Also, like other personality constructs, empathy has been applied to a diverse set of phenomena ranging from sympathy and compassion, to intuition and emotionality. Further, and here unlike most other personality constructs, the measurement of empathy requires an assessment of both

subject and object since the empathic response is a reflection of the relationship between the two. This is particularly the case for approaches to empathy, including ours, in which empathy is defined as a match between the affective response of a perceiver and that of a stimulus person.

Our investigations of the antecedents and consequences of the empathy response, as so defined, have been guided by a three component model of empathy. Two of these components are cognitive: the ability to discriminate and label affective states in others and the ability to assume the perspective and role of another person. Emotional capacity and responsiveness constitute the third component (Feshbach, 1973b; Feshbach & Feshbach, 1972). One implication of this model is that social understanding is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the occurrence of the empathy response. This assumption has been evaluated in a series of studies investigating the development and properties of empathy in children.

In all of these studies, the Feshbach and Roe Affective Situation Test for Empathy (FASTE) was used to elicit and assess empathic behavior. This instrument consists of eight slide sequences accompanied by appropriate verbal narration depicting children in various affective situations conveying happiness, sadness, fear and anger. The child's identification of the affective state of the stimulus child constituted the measure of comprehension, while the match between the response of the child's own affect and that of the stimulus child constituted the index of empathy.

The results of the first study employing this procedure with middle class first grade boys and girls (Feshbach & Roe, 1968) indicated that similarity between the child subject and the stimulus child significantly facilitated empathic responses, boys being more empathic with boys while girls showed more empathy with girls. This interaction was not obtained in the social comprehension measure, the latter reflecting almost complete understanding of the affective situations by this age group. Thus, it appeared that while empathy presupposes some degree of social understanding, the converse is not true.

Evidence indicating that understanding the feelings of another person does not necessarily lead to an empathic response was also obtained in a subsequent study investigating the influence of similarity of ethnicity on empathy (Klein, 1971). Again, while there was uniformly high social comprehension, systematic variability in empathy scores was obtained as a function of similarity. In this study of six to eight year olds, which utilized a new series of slides in which race was varied, it was found that black girls empathized more with black stimulus persons while white girls displayed greater empathy in response to the white stimuli.

Other data, indirectly bearing on the proposition that empathy entails more than social comprehension, is provided in a study of the antecedents and correlates of positive and negative social behaviors (Feshbach 1973a). Of particular relevance to this issue was the finding that the parental child rearing antecedents of cognitive moral judgement were quite different from those found for empathy and the fact that there

was a negligible correlation between these two behaviors in children at ages four to five and six to eight.

The findings of a recent investigation particularly highlight the relationship between social comprehension and empathy (Kuchenbecker, Feshbach & Pletcher, 1974). In this study, a more detailed approach to the appraisal of the child's social comprehension was undertaken. In addition, the auditory and visual components of the Feshbach and Roe Affective stimuli were experimentally varied to investigate the possible differential effects of modality of presentation.

The study involved 144 middle-class white boys and girls from kindergarten, first and second grades who were randomly assigned to a male or female experimenter administering like-sex stimuli under one of the following three experimental presentations: the standard procedure which included the slides and accompanying narration; a visual condition in which the narration was omitted; and an audio condition in which the slides were omitted. For the audio condition, the original narrations were slightly modified so as to equate the different affective sequences for language structure and number of auditory bits of information.

After each sequence, four standardized open-ended questions were asked: 1) What's happening here, what's happened? 2) Anything else? 3) How do you know what happened? and 4) How does that story make you feel? The child's spontaneous answers to the first three questions constituted the main comprehension measures. The child was credited for presence or absence of:

each of the three conceptual parts of the story; sequence of recall; mention of auditory bits of information; attribution of affect, postural and facial features of the stimulus as well as judgemental, elaborative or misinformed responses. The response to the fourth question, "How does the story make you feel?" which differed slightly from previous studies in which the child was simply asked how she or he felt, provided the basis for the empathy measure. As in previous studies, in order for empathy to be scored, the affect reflected in the child's self report had to specifically match the affect observed in the situation. The total number of specific matches across the eight stories constituted the empathy score.

A comparison of the results obtained on the principal measures of comprehension and empathy, reflect significant but contrasting findings. As one might anticipate, there is a marked and significant grade effect in the number of correctly identified conceptual parts, ranging from a mean of 13.1 for kindergarten children to a mean of 18.9 for second graders ( $F = 17.77$ ;  $df = 2,108$ ;  $p < .01$ ).

Significant developmental increments were also obtained on the other comprehension measures which included the number of stories sequentially recalled and the number of recalled auditory bits. An inspection of the comprehension scores also reflects the marked influence of the modality variable.

More conceptual story parts are identified under the visual condition than under any other modality, the respective means being 18.3 for the visual modality, 16.3 for the



auditory-visual modality and 14.2 for the auditory modality ( $F = 9.15$ ;  $df = 2,108$ ;  $p < .01$ ). The same ordering of modality is obtained for sequential recall of stories, with visual modality being superior to the auditory-visual mode of presentation and subjects under the auditory condition again manifesting the lowest comprehension scores ( $F = 10.41$ ;  $df = 2,108$ ;  $p < .01$ ). Although the overall interaction between grade and modality fell short of statistical significance, it appears that the superiority of the visual modality is strongest at the kindergarten level. The kindergarteners obtained particularly low comprehension scores under the auditory modality condition, a finding consistent with other evidence indicating that children at this age level prefer visual to verbal outputs (Calfee, Chapman & Venezky, 1967). By first grade, there is a striking improvement in the comprehension scores under the auditory modality. Of special note are the consistently lower comprehension scores obtained under the auditory-visual as compared to the visual condition, despite the ostensibly greater information provided by the auditory-visual condition.

When we turn to an examination of the empathy scores, a different picture emerges. While the developmental progression in empathy scores corresponds to the developmental changes observed on the comprehension measures, the influence of modality on empathy reflects a very different pattern. Whereas the social comprehension scores were maximal with the visual modality, it was the auditory-visual mode of presentation that



elicited the highest empathy scores ( $F = 2.85$ ;  $df = 2, 108$ ;  $p < .10$ ). Under the auditory-visual condition the mean empathy score was 4.2 in comparison to the mean of 2.8 with the auditory mode and 2.7 under the visual mode. This greater empathic responsiveness under the auditory-visual mode was primarily characteristic for the kindergarten and first grade children.

The overall experimental findings reflect both the close interrelationship between the dimensions of social comprehension and empathy and also their independence. As the child grows older, the ability to comprehend social situations increases as does the tendency to share the affective state of individuals in these social situations. At the same time, the differential effects of the modality variation on empathy as compared to social comprehension indicates that these two categories of behavior are not merely different aspects of the same cognitive process, but are functionally distinct, albeit related, variables.

At a more functional level, the importance of distinguishing between social cognition and empathy, as we have defined it, depends upon the consequences of each of these two processes. Thus, in an earlier study we found that aggression in early elementary aged boys was inversely related to empathy but not to social comprehension (Feshbach & Feshbach, 1969). In a current study we are examining the correlates of social comprehension and empathy in a clinical group of children with learning problems and behavioral deficits (Feshbach, Kuchenbeker &

Feshbach, 1974). It is our anticipation that the social comprehension factor will be associated with the remedial progress in achievement of these children while empathy will be more strongly associated with their social behavior. Perhaps the most critical test of the usefulness of the construct of empathy, as distinguished from social cognition, will be in the effectiveness of different training and educational programs designed to foster pro-social behaviors. In terms of the approach to the study of empathy in children that has been presented here, we would predict that those programs which attend to the affective as well as cognitive aspects of social interaction will prove to be the most successful in enhancing pro-social behaviors.

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